

IN PURSUIT OF THE PERFECT REHEARSAL

JOHN A. THOMSON, Clinician

Saturday, January 31, 2009

Peoria Civic Center

Room 135/136

8:00 – 9:15 a.m.

ORGANIZING IDEA: Rehearsal time is a valuable commodity. This clinic will explore ways to get the most out of the rehearsal time you have with your band, orchestra and jazz students.

FIVE PRINCIPLES THAT LEAD TO SUCCESSFUL AND PRODUCTIVE REHEARSALS

Choose Quality Repertoire

- Selections become the basis for your curriculum
- Things to consider when selecting repertoire
- The unit study composition

Know the Score

- Comprehensive score study leads to well-ordered and productive rehearsals
- Score study techniques
- Don't learn the score in rehearsal

Don't Over-verbalize in Rehearsal

- They want to play, so let them
- Say what needs to be said and move on
- Develop an intentional rehearsal language

Develop and Use your Conducting and Aural Skills

- Show what you want, don't say it
- Look like the music sounds
- Encourage eye contact and remember it goes both ways
- Aural skills matter

Plan your Rehearsals Thoroughly

- Helps you get the most out of each rehearsal
- Several levels of planning
- Evaluate daily rehearsals

THE COMPONENTS OF A SUCCESSFUL REHEARSAL

Pre-rehearsal Preparation

- Prepare the physical environment
- Organize student support
- Post the rehearsal order and special announcements

Warm-up

- Get everyone involved

- Combination of intellectual, visual, physical and auditory processes
- Time to emphasize fundamentals
- You can't tune bad tone

Tuning

- A journey, not a destination
- Tuning and playing in tune
- It's about the "acoustical beats"
- Don't overuse electronics

Technique and Concept Building in the Ensemble

- Sequential building of skills, techniques, habits and behaviors
- Teach musical concepts (knowledge & understandings)
- Teach musical literacy (sight-reading)
- From dependent to independent learner

Problem Solving

- Largest block of time
- Follow well-established learning principles
- Avoid repetition without purpose
- Show them how to practice

Closure

- End with a complete musical experience
- Everyone involved

Post-rehearsal

- Don't just walk away
- Time to interact with students

HOW PODIUM PERSONALITY AND DEMEANOR CAN EFFECT REHEARSAL ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Create a Positive Learning Environment

- Make it safe
- Conductor behaviors
- Check your ego at the door
- It's not about you

QUOTES FOR REFLECTION

QUALITY REPERTOIRE

"I believe that the quality of the music we give our students will play a significant role in the public's perception of the quality and value of music education itself. That is, if we present music which is not serious to our students, we are simultaneously educating the public to understand that what we are doing is not serious." (Whitwell, 1993, p.157).

“Music of high quality need not be music of high complexity....There should be some pieces which present few if any technical or musical problems, some which are very challenging technically and musically, and most which can be performed and understood adequately but which contain enough challenge to warrant periodic study over a long period of time.” (Reimer, 1970, pp.133-134).

CURRICULUM PLANNING

“The curriculum of a discipline is determined by the underlying principles and ideas that give structure to that discipline. The music curriculum is sequentially planned so that primary concepts are revisited, expanded and reinforced – cyclically growing in depth and breadth from year to year. This process of growth differs from the process of accumulation by addition. In a cyclical sequence, the various items that need to be presented do not occur once and for all at some predetermined time. They appear again and again, always in new settings, always with additional meanings. The movement is progressive from simple to complex, obvious to subtle.” (Thomson, 1983, pp.4-5).

REHEARSAL PLANNING

“We will spend hours selecting the ‘perfect’ music for the upcoming concert, but will not extend that same detailed preparation in the planning of the rehearsal format. Not only is this self-defeating, but it becomes a vicious circle leading to personal stress, poor performances, strained rehearsals, and a constant battle for program survival.” (Lautzenheiser, 1992, p.25).

There are obviously not enough hours in the day to do everything we would like to do in order to improve our ensembles. However, in terms of the success of our groups, the rehearsal is the most important hour of the day. If the rehearsal is effective, the ensemble has a much better chance of being successful.....We should have specific objectives in mind for each rehearsal and should have a plan for attaining these objectives. Effective rehearsals don’t happen by chance. Careful planning of rehearsals and carrying out these plans are essential.” (Vinson, 2005, pp.113-114).

CONDUCTING

The movement of the conductor is an important part of the rehearsal as well as the performance. But many conductors limit their movement to the redundancy of time keeping and beat patterns. This means that only stopping and talking, and not watching the conductor, encourages expressive playing.....To eliminate excessive time-beating, the conductor must lead by empowering not by controlling. The conductor must encourage the ensemble to listen for the internal pulse and then must give the ensemble responsibility to sustain it without time-beating or a metronome.” (McMurray, 2005, pp.82-83).

ENSEMBLE PULSE

“I found over the years that the secret to getting an ensemble to play together is to share the responsibility for keeping the pulse with the players in the group.....Sometimes in a rehearsal I will stop conducting to see if the ensemble can maintain the pulse without my help. They always can and this frees me to focus on shaping phrases and musical lines.” (Thomson, 2009, p.19).

TUNING

“A conductor has to understand that harmonic or just tuning and equal temperament are different. A tuning device is wonderful for understanding the tendencies of an instrument in all ranges and notes but cannot correct an ensemble’s tuning problems.” (Thomson, 2009, p.19).

MEANS AND ENDS

“In this context (Comprehensive Musicianship), instrumental performance is not an end in itself, but a means to an end. That end includes the augmentation of knowledge and understanding of the structural elements of music and of music as a creative art form of man in a historical context; the cultivation of habits, attitudes, and appreciations, and, most important, the development of each student’s aesthetic potential, his sensitivity and responsiveness to that which is beautiful in music.” (Garofalo, 1983, p.1).

“We limit ourselves if we only think of our role as trainers of skill or developers of technique. We can get caught up in teaching ‘the notes and rhythms’, the fingerings, how to shape the vowels correctly, how to watch for precise cues – the technique list is endless. As important as all that is, we need to remember that *technique must always have a higher calling than itself*. Our job is to develop the musicians’ technique as a means to something greater, something more musical and meaningful.” (Wis, 2007, p.76).

SIGHT-READING

“Sight-reading is a true test of independent musicianship. If you want to prepare your students to both desire and to be capable of participation in music after they leave high school and college, then you must help them become independent musicians. Good sight-reading skills enable students to form chamber ensembles, play successfully in church ensembles, and participate confidently and successfully in community bands and orchestras. Isn’t that a wonderful goal for school music programs? (Cooper, 2004, p.129).

MUSICAL INDEPENDENCE

“A major goal of music education is to develop students who are musically independent and can progress to the next level by themselves after they leave school.” (Thomson, 1995, p.11).

“As conductors, we are entrusted with the growth of those who sing or play in our ensembles. Their skills, knowledge and experience are equally important considerations. We cannot simply focus on developing their abilities as singers and players; we must also help them understand the creative process from the inside out so that they can move from being musical *for* us, to being musical *with* us, to ultimately, being musical *without* us. Even if they spend the rest of their lives as members of ensembles under someone’s direction, what we should want for the musicians we lead is their ultimate independence: their ability to think and perform musically, to know what musical decisions need to be made when faced with a score and to have the ability to make them. Their growth as autonomous musicians is what we should strive for.” (Wis, 2007, p.14).

PODIUM PERSONALITY

“You see, if I took everything I have learned about great leadership and boiled it down to one, overriding theme, it would be ‘It’s not about me.’ It’s not about what I can achieve or what kind of ensemble I can develop; it’s about gaining an awareness of *what needs to be done to develop*

the people I am given to lead. There has been a fundamental shift in thinking, a shift from ME to THEM; from a focus on position and power to one of leading by serving.” (Wis, 2007, p.xi).

“Sarcasm is not good for children. It destroys their self-confidence and self-esteem. Like strychnine, it can be fatal. Bitter irony and biting sarcasm only reinforce the traits they attack.” (Ginott, 1972, p.66).

“Learning depends on the emotional climate engendered by empathy and civility. In their daily contacts with children, teachers must preserve these vanishing virtues.” (Ginott, 1972, p.77).

“Teachers often ask psychologists how to motivate children to learn. The answer is ‘Make it safe for them to risk failure.’ The major obstacle to learning is fear: fear of failure, fear of criticism, fear of appearing stupid. An effective teacher makes it possible for each child to err with impunity. To remove fear is to invite attempt. To welcome mistakes is to encourage learning.” (Ginott, 1972, p.242).

“I have come to a frightening conclusion. I am the decisive element in the classroom. It is my personal approach that creates the climate. It is my daily mood that makes the weather. As a teacher I possess tremendous power to make a child’s life miserable or joyous. I can be a tool of torture or an instrument of inspiration. I can humiliate or humor, hurt or heal. In all situations it is my response that decides whether a crisis will be escalated or de-escalated, and a child humanized or de-humanized.” (Ginott, 1972, p.15-16).

REFERENCES

Cooper, Lynn (2004). *Teaching Band and Orchestra: Methods and Materials*. Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc.

“The perfect text for college instrumental students and an invaluable reference for Practicing teachers. This book covers every critical area in the professional life of band and orchestra teachers at the beginning and secondary levels.”

Garofalo, Robert (1983). *Blueprint for Band: A Guide to Teaching Comprehensive Musicianship Through School Band Performance*. Ft. Lauderdale, FL: Meredith Music Publications.

“This book was written to provide school band directors with a curriculum guide for teaching comprehensive musicianship. In the approach suggested in this book, the inherent relationships that exist between music structure, style, and performance are consistently emphasized.”

Ginott, Haim (1972). *Teacher and Child: A Book for Parents and Teachers*. New York: The Macmillan Company.

Lautzenheiser, Tim (1992). *The Art of Successful Teaching: A Blend of Content and Context*. Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc.

McMurray, Allan (2005). Conducting in Music, Not Just in Time. In *The Music Director's Cookbook: Creative Recipes for a Successful Program*. Edited by Garwood Whaley. Galesville, MD: Meredith Music Publications.

“A stimulating collection of unique concepts on teaching and conducting by 57 of today's most outstanding music educators. Contains to-the-point, thought-provoking ideas proven successful by master teachers-conductors. Problem solving tips, philosophical concepts and ensemble-building skills all in one easy-to-read collection.”

Reimer, Bennett (1970). *A Philosophy of Music Education*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

Thomson, John (1983). *Wind Ensemble Curriculum Statement*. New Trier High School. Unpublished monograph.

Thomson, John (1993). Teaching with Goals, Not Answers: An Interview with John Whitwell. *The Instrumentalist*. December, pp.11-15.

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Vinson, Johnnie (2005). The Most Important Hour of the Day. In *The Music Director's Cookbook: Creative Recipes for a Successful Program*. Edited by Garwood Whaley. Galesville, MD: Meredith Music Publications.

Wis, Ramona (2007). *The Conductor as Leader: Principles of Leadership Applied to Life on the Podium*. Chicago: GIA Publications, Inc.

“*The Conductor as Leader* introduces a fresh and critical look at the use of power and authority. Wis shows what can happen when there is a fundamental shift in the conductor's thinking from a focus on position and power to developing the musicians the conductor is given to lead.”

Whitwell, David (1993). *Music as a Language: A New Philosophy of Music Education*. Northridge, CA: WINDS.

MATERIALS MENTIONED IN CLINIC

Allen, Michael et al. (2001). *Teaching Music Through Performance in Orchestra, Vol. 1*. Compiled and Edited by David Littrell and Laura Reed Racin. Chicago: GIA Publications.

“This book contains a nuts-and-bolts analysis of 100 of the most significant works for strings and full orchestra. Included for each musical selection is information about the composer, the composition, historical background, technical requirements, stylistic considerations, important musical elements including form and structure, suggestions for additional listening, and a guide to selected references.” (Three volumes in print)

Blocker, Larry et al. (1997). *Teaching Music Through Performance in Band, Vol. 1*. Compiled and Edited by Richard Miles, Chicago: GIA Publications.

“This book contains analyses of the 100 best-known and respected band compositions. Included for each musical selection is information about the composer, the composition,

historical background, technical requirements, stylistic considerations, important musical elements including form and structure, suggestions for additional listening, and a guide to selected references.” (Six volumes in print)

Garofalo, Robert (1983). *Rehearsal Handbook for Band and Orchestra Students*. Galesville, MD: Meredith Music Publications.

“A comprehensive handbook designed especially for secondary school band and orchestra students. The text includes rehearsal enrichment study units covering the fundamentals of music, intervals and chords, transposition, acoustics, tuning and intonation, music terms and symbols, sight-reading, conducting and music history.”

Lake, Mayhew (1938). *Sixteen Chorales by J. S. Bach*. Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard.

“These arrangements follow carefully the harmonization made by Johann Sebastian Bach of sixteen pre-existing melodies. The four parts in each chorale have been designated as Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass; and they have been distributed so that they may be performed by any family group of instruments or by any group of miscellaneous instruments.”

Lisk, Edward (1983). *The Creative Director: Alternative Rehearsal Techniques*. Galesville, MD: Meredith Music Publications.

“The entire structure of ALTERNATIVE REHEARSAL TECHNIQUES is based upon the circle of 4ths. Once students are able to play through the Circle in unison (or octaves), and reading the written letter symbols (not musical notation) then the director is able to apply and create unlimited variations to the structure of the rehearsal.”

Smith, Leonard (1980). *The Treasury of Scales*. Van Nuys, CA: Alfred Music Company, Inc.

“The book includes 96 harmonized scales in each of the 12 major and 12 minor keys (both harmonic and melodic). The four parts in each chorale have been designated as Soprano, Alto, Tenor and Bass; and they have been distributed so that they may be performed by band, orchestra, any family group of instruments, or by any group of miscellaneous instruments.”

Williams, Richard & Jeff King (1998). *Foundations for Superior Performance*. San Diego, CA: Kjos Music Company.

“The purpose of this method book is to provide a comprehensive and sequential collection of warm-ups, scales, technical patterns, chord studies, tuning exercises, and chorales for concert band.....The primary goal is to offer a framework of exercises and routine drills that will facilitate the mastery of essential playing fundamentals.”

Whaley, Garwood (2003). *Basics in Rhythm: An Instructional Text for All Instruments*. Galesville, MD: Meredith Music Publications.

“A comprehensive collection of rhythm exercises for any instrument or voice in individual or group instruction. The purpose of this text is to introduce and develop the rhythms and rhythmic devices common to Western art and popular music from the Renaissance to the present.”

CLINICIAN BIOGRAPHY

John A. Thomson was Director of Bands at New Trier High School for twenty-five years (1982-2007). Prior to this, he served for thirteen years (1967-1980) as Director of Bands at East Allegheny High School near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. His Bachelors and Masters degrees are from Carnegie Mellon University. While completing course work towards a PhD in Music Education at Northwestern University, he served for two years as a Teaching Assistant in both the Departments of Conducting and Performing Organizations and Music Education. For many summers, he served as a conductor at the Blue Lake Fine Arts Camp and has conducted the Camp's International Symphonic Band in Europe.

Mr. Thomson is a Consulting Editor and New Music Reviewer for THE INSTRUMENTALIST Magazine, and is active as a clinician, guest conductor and adjudicator. He observes student teachers for Northwestern University, serves as an adjunct faculty at the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University and conducts the Midwest Young Artists (MYA) Honors Wind Symphony.

Personal awards include several National Band Association Citation of Excellence, the American School Band Directors Association Stanbury Award, the Mr. Holland's Opus Award, the Chicagoland Outstanding Music Educator Award and the Phi Beta Mu Outstanding Bandmaster Award. Mr. Thomson has been inducted into the Phi Beta Mu Illinois Band Directors Hall of Fame at Northwestern University.

Professional affiliations include the American Bandmasters Association, National Band Association (Revelli Composition Award Committee), American School Band Directors Association, Music Educators National Conference, Illinois Music Educators Association, Phi Beta Mu and Phi Mu Alpha.

Mr. Thomson lives in Wilmette, Illinois, with his wife Susan and sons, Brian and Will.

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